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### III. Traditions on display



# Forging Folklore, Disrupting Archives: Curatorial Explorations between Tradition and Innovation

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### ABSTRACT

This article describes how artists, scholars and curators have used folkloric collections and exhibitions as tools to explore the relationship between tradition and innovation. Contemporary art practice has seen a growing interest toward the use of folkloric material. With this in mind, in our curatorial work on the *Forging Folklore, Disrupting Archives* exhibition, we experiment with new methods of ethnographic representation. The article highlights the importance of animating folkloric and traditional objects through experimentation with collaborative, participatory and visual approaches.

### KEYWORDS

Curating, ethnography, folklore, creativity, archive, United Kingdom.



### Introduction: Working and Reworking the Folkloric Material

The *Forging Folklore, Disrupting Archives* exhibition organised in 2014 at the Constance Howard Gallery in London brought together artists and anthropologists to encourage different areas of scholarly enquiry and curatorial practices; the aim was an enquiry into how the notion of “the folk,” its objects and stories, are archived and displayed

historically and in the present time. According to the Oxford Dictionary, to forge means to shape, to create something enduring, or to produce an imitation or a copy. The project was an attempt to think through the notions of forgery as a device to explore the complex spectrum between the traditional and the innovative. By moving away from notions of authentic copy, accurate representation or a master curatorial narrative, the project aimed to interrogate ways in which archives can be re-ordered and re-contextualised, and collections rejoined with their creative and everyday counterparts. The project was situated in the



practices of combining material exploration of folklore with curating while digging into archives and museum stores. Buchczyk, Nicolescu and Urdea were inspired by projects in which curators and contemporary artists have assembled and drawn on “traditional” material.

In recent years, the curatorial innovative reinterpretations of traditional material have been proliferating across Europe. For example, the permanent display *The Mechanisms of Collective Memory of Tito and Yugoslavia* at the Museum of Yugoslav History set up in 2015 in Belgrade offered an innovative way of interpreting museum collections, archive material and documentary video material, linking them to the present. Arkhipov’s *Home-Made: Contemporary Russian Folk Artifacts*, published in 2006, explored contemporary Russian folk artefacts as utilitarian objects and the personal stories behind these collections. Perhaps one of the best known examples of contemporary artists drawing on and curating folk art practice in the UK has been the work of contemporary artists such as Grayson Perry, Jeremy Deller, and Alan Kane. In the 2006 project *The Charms of Lincolnshire* project he curated at Victoria Miro Gallery in London, Perry assembled historic items from Lincolnshire museums – embroidered samplers, threshing sticks, duck shooters, eel stangs, wax dolls, minutely stitched smocks. Deller and Kane’s *Folk Archive* (2005) has been a collection and documentation of contemporary folk and popular art in the UK at the turn of the century, situated in the rich seam between art and anthropology. There was also David Littler’s 2014 performance and public engagement work which combined his fascination with people, print, pattern, textiles, sound, music, folk, machines, collective-making, sampling, games, and gifting. He devised Yan Tan Tethera (2014) as a brand new English Folk Dance and Song performance for Cecil Sharp House, the home of the English Folk Dance and Song Society.

Increasingly, the interplay between tradition and innovation has been showcased by major institutions. The V&A exhibition in London,

*The Power of Making* (2011), presented new forms of lingerie made by Polish folk producers, and the *Extreme Crafts* (2007) exhibition at the Contemporary Art Center in Vilnius, featured work by Severija Incirauskaite-Kriauneviciene whose embroidered car doors used folk motifs on discarded junk. In Warsaw, the Zachęta Gallery in a 2016 exhibition, *Poland – a Country of Folklore?*, revisited the early decades of living in post-war Poland, telling a complex story about the centrally-fostered national folk culture and alternative artistic fascinations with folk-art motifs and their caricatures. In London, Tate Modern’s *British Folk Art* exhibition challenged the distinctions between art and artefact, presenting folk art within an art historical context. The proliferation of such initiatives demonstrates a range of new opportunities stemming from innovative archival explorations, challenging the boundaries of tradition and creativity and reconnecting the seemingly traditional material with new work. *The Forging Folklore* project responded to this resurgence of interest in folkloric expressions to address the way in which folklore, through its “neutrality,” adaptability and efficacy, constitutes the nexus between people and the changing cultures, politics, practices, aesthetics and skills of the twenty-first century.



### **Situating Three Threads of Folkloric Forgeries**

The curatorial concept of *Forging Folklore, Disrupting Archives* arose from the pre-existing collaboration between Buchczyk, Nicolescu and Urdea. In 2008, Nicolescu started her doctoral research in Goldsmiths, University of London on the politics of display in the Romanian Peasant Museum and its predecessors. As a doctoral student, she also helped identify the provenience of two Romanian folk collections donated to Horniman Museum in London. Based on that preliminary research and outreach funding, Buchczyk and Urdea were appointed

to research these collections and organise an exhibition in the Horniman Museum, London. The Goldsmiths exhibition functioned in parallel to the *Revisiting Romania* exhibition at Horniman Museum (for a discussion of the exhibition, see Buchczyk 2015). A dialogic relationship was established between *Forging Folklore, Disrupting Archives* and the *Revisiting Romania* museum representations of folklore, allowing the group to explore multiple forgeries of folklore, and to interrogate how value travels not only through folkloric objects, but through the forms of assembling such objects into stores and archives. The authors' motivation for this exhibition came from exploring alternative ways of exhibiting "folklore" in a gallery, but also from juggling ideas of value, order and archival work, among different institutions, time-frames, disciplines, and last, but not least, curators.

For the *Forging Folklore, Disrupting Archives* exhibition, Buchczyk, Nicolescu and Urdea used two collections from Goldsmiths' Special Collections. The first one was the Balkan textile collection, where the three anthropologists found stitched and decorated blouses collected by UK-based artists in the 1970s and 1980s. This set of objects predominantly served as a handling collection used by Goldsmiths tutors in textile and practice-based courses. The second collection was made up of texts and images which belonged to Albert Lloyd, a self-taught ethnomusicologist, journalist and folk singer, who travelled to Romania, Bulgaria and Albania in the 1960s and 1970s. Lloyd's affiliation to communism in Britain allowed him access to folklore festivals, as well as to folklore specialists in these countries (for a detailed account of his life and work, see Arthur and English Folk Dance Song Society 2012). Through the parallel examination of these holdings, the project aimed to bring new life to the collections by digging into their past and inviting creative experimentation in response to the objects and the broader theme of Balkan folklore. This proliferation of ethnographic objects and archives, both in Horniman Museum and in Goldsmiths, revealed different approaches to

understanding and appropriating folklore. For the *Forging Folklore* exhibition, we decided to focus on three entangled threads. The following section of the article presents the three key curatorial directions in more detail, along with the presented work and the conceptual underpinnings of the multiple forgeries presented in the exhibition space.



### First Thread: Objects of Value

Urdea's display was prompted by her fieldwork in Romania, in 2011, where she was researching the origins of the Romanian ethnographic collection at the Horniman Museum. At the time when it arrived in London, in 1955, the collection was considered to be representative of the "folk art of Romania." Using theoretical perspectives on the social life of objects (Appadurai 1988) that have determined a turn in the museological understanding of artefacts, Urdea visited villages where these objects were made, in the hope that she would reconnect them with the families of the people who made, used and eventually sold them or gave them to the museum. Although only two of the objects found their family, her fieldwork revealed more and more layers accruing onto the objects whose social life she sought to illustrate. The research made her reconsider the quest for the path of an object all the way to its origins, which the new museological turn proposed (Thomas 1991, Peers and Brown 2003), as well as the politics behind the "authenticity" label demanded by museums (Starn 2002).

On her return, Urdea found herself in possession of her own folk collection, made up of gifts from some of her interviewees, or of objects that she had felt compelled to buy. Each of them mediated different relationships with the people involved in her research. At first glance, a curator of ethnographic objects – in Britain or in Romania – would have qualified her collection as inconsistent and not particularly valuable. Indeed one British textile specialist put it to her that one of the shirts



she had received as a present from a village may have some “personal value,” but little else beyond that. Ethnographic museums such as the Horniman Museum had little interest in the items, which were either duplicates of what the museum already had in their stores, or were considered unrepresentative of Romanian traditional crafts. From the point of view of the museum in Britain, value was measured as authenticity,<sup>1</sup> but also intricacy of labour that produced them, as well as personal attachment of the giver (Joy 2016). Despite the claims of rationality and modernity of the museum as institution, the way value is ascribed and produced (Foucault 1986) by the museum raises questions on the politics of archives and collections.

The objects that Urdea had brought with her – a few woven bags, two frocks, a few overskirts (*catrință*) and a few wall hangings (*ștergar*) – were not hers in the same way as if they had been bought from the market. Indeed anthropologists have long been debating over the nature of the gift, which incorporates a part of the giver, and which is never an object entirely possessed (Mauss 1990, Weiner 1992, Strathern 1988). This way, the gift places an obligation and a responsibility on the receiver to reciprocate. In some cases, the gift cannot and must not be returned in its entirety – instead the receiver remains with a debt that can never be repaid (Graeber 2009). The intricacy of the gift meant that the objects in Urdea’s collection were more in suspension, rather than in her full possession. Urdea knew many of the givers would have liked to see their objects on display in London. This is where her intention to do an exhibition started, from objects whose former possessors were proud of, but whose value and presence in a museum was put into question.

Institutional settings change the meanings of objects, and add layers to their social life. Stewart (1984) comments on the distinction between collection and the souvenir, noting that only the latter maintains connections to the time and place where it was found. Whereas the collection makes sense as a whole, the object loses its historical traces. Urdea decided to link up the objects she had with

ones from two other personal collections that had become part of institutional collections, the Lloyd collection and the Goldsmiths Textile collection. She wanted to bring to surface biographic details of the object owners, along with various symbolic uses of “folklore” in Britain and Romania<sup>2</sup>.

### *Lloyd’s Collection*

Goldsmiths’ Special Collections hosts part of Bert Lloyd’s impressive collection folklore material from various parts of the world, especially from countries in Eastern Europe. In the interwar period, Lloyd’s interest in British folklore went hand in hand with his political affiliation to the Communist Party, fuelled by his working class background, and his early experience of poverty and unemployment. His declared engagement with communism was possibly what encouraged him to travel and study the folklore of Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Albania. We can speculate that it also facilitated close and long-standing connections to these countries, demonstrated by the wealth of material meticulously kept in his archive.

The Romanian part of the collection comprises books, sound recordings, photography, correspondence with Romanian folklorists, and many carefully organized newspaper cuttings. In post-war Britain, Lloyd was part of the resurgence of folk music as a popular genre. In industrial parts of the country, Working Men’s Clubs, where Lloyd himself performed, were places of recreation for the community, where talented members would often perform local folk music. To Lloyd, songs sang together in the working men’s clubs of the country spoke of the everyday life of working class people and had the potential to raise class consciousness.

Judging by Lloyd’s archive, we could speculate that, in Romania, he was interested in a similar institution, namely the House of Culture. These places also hosted folklore performances – but of a different kind. The Romanian counterparts were places run entirely by the Communist Party,

1. The term is used to evaluate different aspects at different times. See Urdea 2015.

2. The notion of “folklore” has a complex history in Romania, where the term was heavily employed during the communist period. It referred to what was considered artful and aesthetically pleasing in the world of peasants. It entails a separation between the pre-modern, peasant time and the modern period (see Kaneff 2004).



and their declared purpose was first and foremost communist propaganda. Folklore performances played a central role, as the ideologues made efforts to merge national culture with communist ideology (Verdery 1995). The mix of politics and folklore resulted in something very different from the grass-roots clubs in Britain. Having been a 90% agrarian country before the war, Romania industrialized at extremely high speed with the start of the socialist period (Roberts 1951). The peasants had little choice but to become workers, and the state had a declared intention to use elements of local culture in order to plant the seed of the New Man, equipped with a communist consciousness (Mihăilescu 2008).



Map of Romania representing the “musical life” of the Romanian Popular Republic in 1959, found in Lloyd’s archive at Goldsmiths Special Collections. It illustrates places of traditional song, institutions developed during the communist period that encouraged folkloric music, as well as spaces for performance. Courtesy of Constance Howard Gallery.

Folklore came to incorporate only certain aspects of the local culture, and was used to support the modern communist state with houses of culture playing a crucial role. In these places, the ideology activists would educate the peasants in the spirit of communism, but at the same time bring them information of interest about agriculture, about their work, as well as entertainment (films, organized games). They usually had a library attached to them; they hosted exhibitions; a radio and later on a television set were also available<sup>3</sup>.

Subversion of any kind did not seem possible in these places. Meanwhile, Romanian ethnographers were silently rejecting the state-

orchestrated folklore performed by the newly created working classes, in favour of a search for authenticity in the less modern parts of the country, such as Maramureș region (see Urdea 2015). But where was Bert Lloyd in this silent power struggle? Was he aware of it? In the 1960s and 1970s, Lloyd managed to record and film various rituals in Romanian regions, he followed in the footsteps of Bartok<sup>4</sup> to the remote villages of Pădureni, he was part of judging juries at Romanian folk festivals, and he published articles on Romanian folklore. It seems that everywhere he went, he indiscriminately picked up material on everything to do with Romanian folklore music, whether recorded by professional singers, or sung at funerals on a dirt road, or performed by amateur groups of workers in the towns’ communist houses of culture. Did the “authentic traditions” matter to him any more than the performed folklore? Or did this distinction not exist for him?

Urdea was interested in the incongruity between village culture and performed folklore, which made its way into Lloyd’s archive. She chose to display images from the folklore performances in which Lloyd was, presumably, part of the jury. These images were displayed next to photographs that Urdea took during her own fieldwork of folklore performers who appeared on folklore-dedicated TV channels in 2015. These images comment on the distinctions between authenticity and performance, between rurality and modernity.

### *In and Out of the Communist Sphere*

The three authors of the exhibition looked out for the things which, during the Cold War, allowed movement between what was considered to be two distinctive worlds: that of communism and that of capitalism. Urdea decided to display some of the maps found in Lloyd’s collection, illustrating the activity of the working people in communist Romania. One of the maps she found was populated by various objects, symbols of the people’s labour in various parts of the country. Another

3. See Yurchak (2005) and Grant (2011) for more about houses of culture in the Soviet Union.

4. The Hungarian composer travelled through villages in Banat, Transylvania and Hungary in search of inspiration for his music at the turn of the twentieth century.

one showed leisure activities and featured shepherds, grapevines and couples in folk attire alongside activities such as skiing or enjoying health spas. The maps illustrated the modern project of socialism, the necessity to know the territory and to inscribe the new ideology onto the landscape, down to benign leisure activities. But there was something else to them: bright colours and light-heartedness, the wealth of material goods, or the map key, written in English, telling about the Republic's "cultural, scientific and sports exchanges." All these spoke not so much of the communist project, but of the optimism of the 1960s, on both sides of the Iron Curtain. This supports Buck-Morss' idea (2002) that post-war modernity had common features on both sides of the Iron Curtain.



Dollar Shop in the gallery space.  
Courtesy of Constance Howard Gallery

Folklore and goods permeated the boundary between communist and capitalist countries. Lloyd had been lured by Romania's folklore, as well as its communism. Yet he must certainly have got the point that certain things of the capitalist world attracted the people living in communist countries. After a collaboration with Tiberiu Alexandrescu on a book publication, the Romanian folklorist writes to Lloyd saying that, instead of his due fee, he would rather have a few English goods sent to him and his family. The tone of the letter exposes the close relationship that he and Bert Lloyd had. Alexandrescu sends a precise list of items of clothing, for each member of the family, including details of material, colour, and cut. It was down to Lloyd to shop for them. Folk items travelled in opposite direction. Two

Romanian blouses, currently in the Constance Howard textile collection, had been bought in the "Dollar Shop" in 1979 by Diane Keay, a traveller to Romania who was interested in folk attire. This movement of commodities across the Iron Curtain – folk objects from Romania to Britain, clothes made from modern fabrics from Britain to Romania – shows that the borders were, at times, porous. The blouses were produced in one of the specialized workshops in the country, to become commodities that were stocked in the Dollar Shops, which only sold goods to foreigners. There, foreign currency was exchanged for "folklore." This ability of "folklore" to act as a form of currency was also picked up by Buchczyk, who explored the journey of folk patterns to high street shops (see below).

### *Fieldwork Objects*

Urdea's research project in Romania involved seeking the relatives of the people who made the objects at the Horniman around the 1950s, when most of them were collected. Urdea chose to restrict her search to items of dress from a few villages. At the same time, she wanted to see how the counterparts of the objects in the Horniman collection had evolved *in situ*. Urdea used these textiles as a comment to the kind of performed folklore that comprises Lloyd's archive.

One of the items that she chose to put on display had been made by an accomplished craftswoman from the village of Soveja, in Vrancea: a woven bag made that year for the crafts market. During the 1970s and 1980s, the craftswoman participated in the Song to Romania festival displaying her folk art, and creating and reciting folk poetry. The festival allowed people like her to win fame and be celebrated as carriers of the Romanian national ethos. More recently, she felt that her art was being dismissed – she was no longer invited to museums and fairs. She hoped that meeting the anthropologist might promote her work in Bucharest or beyond. Although unused, the woven bag seemed to have a rich biography which made it unwanted by current

museum specialists in Britain and Romania.

The shirt of Maria G., from the hamlet of Muncei, in Vrancea was another object on display. In 1955 her husband, Vasile, sold a cloak, a pair of felt trousers and a fur hat to a museum specialist, and the objects eventually ended up in the Horniman Museum. Urdea was lucky to meet his daughter, Maricica, who had recently become a grandmother. By then both Maricica's parents had died. Her mother had passed away recently and was very much on her mind, which is why she was struck by the visit of an anthropologist asking about things that had been made by her mother, and worn by her father. As the three objects were in the Horniman Museum, Maricica offered the anthropologist a fourth object – the blouse. The shirt was made before the war, of hemp and cotton cloth woven by Maria Ghinea, and has sparse “golden” and “silver” threads and rusty metallic sequins which give away the age of the shirt. The anthropologist took the shirt, but was left wondering why she received the gift: Was it the emotion of the encounter and conversation? Was it Maricica's intention to put her mother's dress next to her father's objects in the museum? Was it so because she (wrongly) believed that Urdea was a specialist in textiles, and would appreciate it? The Horniman showed no interest in the blouse – after all, they had other ones from that region. And the anthropologist was not ready to give it up to the museum stores either. Nor could she wear it. It was an object in suspense. Urdea believed that putting it on display and telling its story may help find its place.

Appadurai and Kopytoff's notion of the “biography of an object” tells about objects changing meaning as they move from one place to another, as they change owner, or as they move from being inalienable on to becoming commodities and back again. Yet there are moments of “suspense” in this biography, when an object cannot find its new function or meaning, or when relationships to it are reconfigured. Similarly to Maricica's shirt, the objects at the Horniman museum were also placed “in suspense” for the duration of the fieldwork, when new connections were

being established, and meanings were about to change as a new display was being prepared. The display of Maricica's shirt at the Constance Howard Gallery revealed one such connection between two “suspended” objects.

Another shirt on display was made in the same village, sometime in the 1970s. In the 1960s and 1970s, in Vrancea, people were still wearing clothes that looked like traditional attire. As the country modernized after WWII, there was no longer time to make fibre out of hemp and weave the fabric at home. The heavy metallic thread, so highly appreciated before the war, had become unavailable. Other synthetic fibres and soft, lightweight materials could be bought in the shops, and people preferred them to the old, heavy ones, made in the household. More flexible materials and threads meant a change in the pattern, and, in many cases, made the work easier – though no less complex. These “modern” shirts are usually rejected by museums, who do not consider them valuable or authentic.

Although they may look the same as the “folk art” or “peasant objects” on display in ethnographic museums in Romania



Urdea's personal collection and fieldwork photographs.  
Courtesy of Constance Howard Gallery.

and Britain, Urdea's items had their value questioned in the gallery space because of their biographies. To the ethnographic museum, it all hangs on what kind of image of the “source community” these stories evoke. Urdea's aim was to disrupt the totalizing image of the “source of the object” that museum collections seek to evoke. Further on, Nicolescu's installation sought to disrupt the effect the institutional collection has on the object.

## Second Thread: On the Archive's Fabric: Folklore and the Politics of Neutrality

The second thread in this curatorial project is inspired by the many changing political contexts items in archives live through. Nicolescu's piece in the exhibition takes the form of an installation of a tablecloth patched and pieced together from photographed fragments of documents which are included in Albert Lloyd's archive to be found in Goldsmiths' Special Collections. This archive contains proceedings from conferences, programs of folklore festivals, pages from newspapers, propaganda images collected by the self-trained ethnomusicologist Albert Lloyd in the 1960s and 1970s during his trips to Albania, Bulgaria and Romania. However, Nicolescu argues that Lloyd's archive hosted in Goldsmiths is not only the outcome of an eager collector, in the person of Albert Lloyd,



Tablecloth patched and pieced together from photographed fragments of documents which are included in Albert Lloyd's archive in Goldsmiths' Special Collections.  
Photo credit: Gabriela Nicolescu.

but also of an eager producer of paperwork and books related to folklore events during communist Romania: the communist state and its many institutions producing and distributing folklore materials.

By taking pictures of these archival documents, Nicolescu adds yet another layer to the Lloyd's archive and contributes to the archontic power and the archivation mood (Derrida, 1998 [1995]). After photographing the archive, she cut the photographs into pieces and put them together in a random order, for visitors to pick up and put together making their own associations. The photographed

fragments printed on textile photographic paper were meant to point to two aspects. The first one was the materiality/ the fabric of the archives themselves. This aspect made both researchers and visitors entering Constance Howard Gallery reflect on the materiality of the archives, but also on the various layers of memory folkloric objects allude to. The second one is to encounter the archive with excitement, by giving to audiences the possibility to feel the archives close to their bodies, to touch them and recombine fragments of these archives.

This "hands on" installation of images of archival material uses the common base, or substrate, of a plastic tablecloth, a material item chosen precisely because of its ubiquitous presence within socialist and post-socialist day to day reality. This tablecloth in its every day materiality and use interferes with and disrupts the performative nature of the folklore objects on display. The tablecloth was indeed an item which could tell about the everyday customs of people living through socialism. It functioned as a support not only for plates and food, but also as a backcloth for conversations, tensions, caresses, memories, regrets, hopes, aspirations, and desires. Differently from it, stage costumes in socialist Romania, and all other folkloric items were not the reality of peasant life, but instead a reinterpretation of tradition for public audiences, made visible through propaganda circulated by communist cultural workers, such as museum professionals and folklorists. The reinterpretation they produced was constructed for purely political purposes and was very far from the everyday realities of peasants, whether they still lived in rural Romania or had become first-generation urbanites.

Stemming from her piece in this exhibition experiment, Nicolescu argues that the way we work with archives is by being attracted to details. Katy Ferguson (2008) believed that archives contain illuminating things, meaning those things that stir up the imagination, and provoke those who enter archives to make their own connections and dream. In her installation, Nicolescu adds to Ferguson's idea and suggests that, in order to find these



“shiny things,” the person who excavates an archive needs to perform a process of locating, noticing, and penetrating details, thus making a distinction between what is important or shiny and what it is not. Each individual and each époque regards different things as “shiny.” Through this piece Nicolescu invited the visitor to look at and to engage critically with her own selection, and, moreover, she challenged the visitors to reassemble the pieces of the archive as they like, to make their own meanings and connections on the tablecloth in front of them.

Once converted into photographic form, the visual and textual documents contained in Lloyd’s archive lend themselves to selecting and cutting more readily than they would as physical objects. In ethnographic museums, ethnographic objects function as fragments capable of indicating the presence of an ampler reality, a reality whose edges or limits are uncertain and open to questioning: seen like this ethnographic objects work like [filmic] “cuts.” In her book on exhibiting ethnographic objects, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett states that “the artfulness of the ethnographic object is an art of excision, of detachment, an art of the excerpt” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 19). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett asked herself where such cuts should be made. Should we exhibit the chair as an ethnographic object *per se*? Or the table near the chair, the cup on the table? Should we also put some tea in the cup? (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 19).

As an anthropologist and curator of this installation Nicolescu delves into Lloyd’s archive in an almost surrealist way, by theorising and experimenting with details. Her installation stems from her previous curatorial projects where she experimented with the contingency of ethnographic objects and from her desire to go beyond what is perceived to be the dullness and boring appearance of archives and of museum stores (Nicolescu 2016a). Archives have been sources of inspiration and creativity for Romanian folklorist Irina Nicolau, who worked at both the Romanian Peasant Museum and the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore (for a detailed

account of Nicolau’s work with archives, see Blidaru *et al.* 2003); for many European artists making art from bureaucracy (Spieker 2008);



Shiny things, cuts from the archive.  
Photo credit: Gabriela Nicolescu.

and, last but not least, for anthropologists (Tarlo 2003). Nicolescu’s piece both alludes to and investigates *new methodologies* combining curatorial expertise with research and drawing on a text-based and visual archive.

Nicolescu’s approach to collecting and exhibition making reminded of what James Clifford (1981) coined as ethnographic surrealism. Clifford says: The surrealist moment in ethnography is that moment in which the possibility of comparison exists in unmediated tension with sheer incongruity. This moment is repeatedly produced, and smoothed over, in the process of ethnographic comprehension (...) Collage brings to the work (here the ethnographic text) elements that continually proclaim their foreignness to the context of presentation. These elements – like a newspaper clip or a feather – are marked as real, as collected not invented by the artist-writer.

The procedures of (a) cutting out and (b) assemblage are, of course, basic to any semiotic message; here they are the message. (Clifford 1981: 563)

Based on this surrealist experience of thinking through collecting and exhibition making, Nicolescu built her piece in the exhibition through juxtaposition of valuable and not-valuable items. She favoured cutting out and assembling different found objects with objects from the official stores of the Special Collections in Goldsmiths. To paraphrase Clifford, her ethnographic surrealism avoided the portrayal of the notions of Romanian “folk” as organic wholes, or as unified, realistic worlds, where “found” evidence, not fully integrated into the logic of existing collections, disrupted archives, stores and existing taxonomies.

By putting such various understandings of the “folk” in incongruity, Nicolescu’s installation contributes to an understanding of folkloric objects as forgeries in themselves. In conversations with Alexandra Urdea whose work was presented above, Nicolescu argued that Albert Lloyd’s archives contained more than just “folkloric” data. The back-pages of newspaper material provided invaluable data. Images of people in their spare time, skiing or visiting Romanian sea-side resorts, proved to offer contrasting visualisations of communist Romania.

Looking at these two faces of archival materials, the front and back page of the newspapers, the desired and the implicit, one could witness how images of modern Romanians stood alongside images of Romanians dressed in “folkloric” clothes. This combination and juxtaposition of materialities and parallel realities of communism drew out disparities as well as commonalities, threads, frames and details, but also showed the important role folklore played in communist propaganda and in sustaining communist modernity in Eastern Europe. As Nicolescu argues elsewhere, “folklore and ethnography were essentially rethought by the new authorities in order to promote a formalized

study of objects, which was conceived in order to help convey communist ideology in new social and cultural spaces by focusing on objects and customs, and by brushing over the social dimension associated with ethnological or sociological research” (Nicolescu 2016b: 72). Folklore and ethnography were the only two social sciences accepted by the socialist regime, in a context when sociology was marginalized and ethnology carried fascistic connotations.

### *Textiles, Folklore and the Politics of Neutrality*

Through folklore festivals, exhibitions and the publication of books related to folklore, Romanian communist institutions established connections with multiple states around the world, including capitalist ones. Albert Lloyd was a communist living in the UK but who travelled often in socialist states for cultural exchanges. His dreams and aspirations encountered in socialist Romania a fertile ground. For a more detailed account of Bert Lloyd’s life, communist views and professional career see Arthur, D., & English Folk Dance Song Society (2012). We do not know how exactly Lloyd understood the proliferation of folkloric events in Romania, neither if he had a critical or appreciative eye towards the festivities he joined. What we do know is that under the umbrella of tradition and folklore, multiple such meetings occurred: the meeting between Albert Lloyd’s passion for worker’s songs and Romanian socialist folklore is just one of them.

By mobilising the language of tradition, and consequently of a-temporality and a-politicism, the Romanian state used folklore as a neutral space for discussions over communal values in a world divided by political ideals. I suggest that it is exactly this “neutrality” and availability to be filled with meaning that makes folklore extremely political<sup>5</sup>. Folklore was used equally for the purposes of fascist and communist regimes, not only in Romania, but also in other European contexts such as the French (Peer

5. I take the idea of neutrality as politics from The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology (2012), where Slavoj Žižek explains the principle of the empty centre which can be refilled by multiple contents. An illustrative example is represented by Beethoven’s Ode to Joy that has been used by several opposed political ideologies to sustain their various agenda.



1998) and the German (Bendix 2002) ones.

To build on the idea of the hidden and un-visible politicism of folklore, Nicolescu has integrated on top of the tablecloth archival installation a selection of textiles from everyday communist and so-called “post-communist” realities exhibited hanging on a rope. Patches of a gown, a dress, a handmade dolly and even fragments from old pyjamas hung on the wall close to the table. These fragments were collected by Nicolescu from people who lived during the communist regime in Romania (1947 – 1989) and who remembered the scarcity of clothes that could be bought from shops and the time invested by many of the women in making and patching the family clothes. The fragments of these day to day clothing items, kept by women as provision, pointed to a different type of the archontic power: a storage for need, close to the body, close to improvisation, one which was not made for stage costumes, nor for displaying, but to be worn indoors, inside the house. The everyday is again something that might be considered neutral – and yet it is not. By putting together these two parallel “neutralities,” folkloric outfits next to patches of everyday clothing, Nicolescu provoked the visitor to reflect on the identity of those who wore the folkloric outfits and on the purpose these outfits served. Alongside the Balkan textile collection existing in Goldsmiths, Nicolescu proposed a collection of fragments from the socialist period. The juxtaposition of images of folklore with textiles used by people during the last years of the socialist regime in Romania inspired reflections on materiality and representation and on how folklore was interpreted and used across the Iron Curtain by different institutions supporting various political regimes. What was the relation between the stage and the everyday realities? Who dressed up in folkloric blouses? Who sang ballads? Who danced on the stage of the Song to Romania festival?

Most of the fragments of text and images taken from Albert Lloyd’s folklore

archive show what Western visitors as Lloyd believed “custom” and “tradition” to be. At the same time, it is very possible that Lloyd was aware of the propaganda dimension of the entire effervescence of folkloric events and publications. It is also possible that his collection wanted us to reflect more on the importance of institutions such as the Institute of Folklore together with the Folk Art Museum (the predecessor of



Selection of socialist textiles for day to day clothing. Personal archive.  
Photo credit: Gabriela Nicolescu.

the Romanian Peasant Museum) played in socialist Romania. The installation of Nicolescu is built in opposition to Lloyds’ archives of propaganda material. Her installation shows that there were other clothes closer to the Romanian bodies – the everyday clothes to be found in shops, opened in all the villages and cities in the country, which were very different from the stage costumes. Who has the right over representation of the peasant and copyright over his objects is a theme which will be discussed also in the third thread.



### Third Thread: Forging and Reinventing Folklore

The third thread, curated by Buchczyk, addressed the ongoing process of reworking folk prototypes in creative practice and fashion. This component of the exhibition explored the theme of imitation, adaptation



and alteration of folk sources. In 2014, Buchczyk initiated an open call for graduate students of Goldsmiths College to delve into the Constance Howard collection, comprising textile art, technical samples, embroidery and dress from different regions across the world. The artists embarked on individual exploration of the archives, including the textile pieces, pattern books, folk collection catalogues and their own experiences with the folkloric.

The thread was embedded in the recent debates about tradition and innovation (Hallam and Ingold 2007, Makovicky 2011), critiques of fossilisation of the intangible (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004), and the problematic nature of authenticity (Jones 2010, Jones and Yarrow 2013, Kingston 1999, Reisinger and Steiner 2006). Art and craft have been entangled in classifications and hierarchies valorising creative novelty and repetitive execution (Adamson 2007, Ingold 2001). Often in museums, folkloric material is presented as staged authenticity and “mounted in a hermetic aesthetic space” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 408) as spectacle intended to evoke “the effect called the real world” (1998: 3). As the ideas of the authentic have been key to museum classifications, any modification or heterogeneity of artefacts have led to their exclusion from the exhibition space (Kingston 1999: 188).

This thread aimed to generate a holding space for the unconsidered innovative, the heterogeneous and the modified. The exhibition space intended to test critical approaches that have suggested that innovations are recontextualisations of practice (Demian and Wastell 2007: 119), and that creative processes and improvisational actions are socially embedded, intertwined with situated enactment and active regeneration (Hallam and Ingold 2007). The display was designed as a device to create a space for discontinuity, a visual inventive method to investigate the “ongoingness, relationality, contingency and sensuousness” of folkloric

production as a dimension of social life (Lury and Wakeford 2012: 2). As a result of the call, a selection of five pieces was shown on display.

The forging of folk prototypes is strongly embedded in the notion of archival gestures. The archival work could be explicit, conducted systematically through layers of categorised sources. It could also be accidental, resembling serendipitous encounters with folk objects or patterns that could fascinate and inspire. Gitanjali Pyndiah and Oana Pârvan worked with the theme of forging the archive. In their collaborative film, they asked how the archive could be transported into the future so we could engage with it in the present. Oana Pârvan was a Romanian researcher based in London, completing doctoral studies in Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, working on the politics of representation surrounding contemporary instances of collective action. Gitanjali Pyndiah, a London based writer and doctoral research in cultural studies at Goldsmiths, was interested in decolonial aesthetics and performative historiographies.

For the *Forging Folklore* piece, Pârvan and Pyndiah worked on the intersection between folklore textiles and notions of femininity. In a mixed-media installation, combining sensory engagement with the patterns and archival images of peasant women at work, they reflected on the tensions between domesticity and work, and materiality and embodiment. The video installation offered a sensual and intimate interpretation of the traditional materials, such as a peasant shirt, old photographs and hypnotising images of the pattern book. The rhythm of the projection presenting the body in spontaneous movement through affective memories, often excluded from the archive, was a reflection on the seemingly static nature of archival holdings. The artwork produced by Pârvan and Pyndiah generated an alternative fluid encounter with the archival material, problematizing the institutionalised categories of

preserving folklore material. The intimate, often forgotten sensory encounters with the archival material told a story of the more intimate aspects of folklore that are being rendered invisible.

The dynamics of visibility and invisibility in the representation folklore and femininity has also been explored in the intricate artwork created by Clare Stanhope, a doctoral researcher in Arts Practice and Learning at the Centre for The Arts and Learning, Goldsmiths College. In her conversation with the Constance Howard archive, Stanhope focused on the materiality of the South East European headscarf. The headscarf is both historical and contemporary, it holds a narrative that speaks of the political lived experiences of women in many countries, and it also linked to social narratives of working class women from Romanian peasants to Stanhope's mother covering her hair curlers with a head scarf. Currently, she reflected, the headscarf is worn for both fashion purposes and political and religious means; a contentious space that weaves many feminist debates into its threads.

Stanhope's research looked at the agency of matter as central to the process of art making, focusing on the agency of skin. Through investigations of how Western drawing structures permeate into the ideals and structures of viewed female perfection both in art and contemporary media, her research discussed how these ideals resonate and debilitate the everyday movements and ownership of the young female skin. In the context of her own research, working through the Constance Howard archival material, Stanhope saw the Romanian peasant clothing depicted in the catalogues of the archive as an evocation of notions of perfection and the time-consuming detail of the patterns on the garments. However, it was the inside or underneath of the garment that captured her imagination. The stitches held the traces of past histories, hinting to the story of the garments and the women who created them. The images

of headscarves worn by female Romanian peasants were of particular interest, and she began to see these items as a thread that links many women together, crossing cultural and social boundaries.

Stanhope's artwork for *Forging Folklore* drew on gendered traditions of stitch and also the skin as a shared female narrative. The piece also began to question the contemporary view of the female skin, and the encouraged desire for 'perfect skin', which pushes us to iron out any wrinkles and creases or imperfections. The "Glue Skin Headscarf" attempted to combine both histories and realities. The cast glue skins formed a material where the lines of the skin were similar to the lines in cloth. The translucency of the material allowed the visitors to look through the surface of the skin or headscarf. This way, as a second skin, a removed skin, a potentially forgotten skin, it aimed to reflect the mislaid narratives and skills of past generations. Inspired by the archival material, the artwork told a story of both the personal, affective notions of the headscarf<sup>6</sup> and the invisibility of female labour in the creation of intricate patterns and textile work in general (Daniels 1987, Dedeoglu 2014, Goddard 1996, King 1995).

Savitri Sastrawan's work was also embedded in a subjective experience and affective encounter with the Constance Howard collections. In her exploration, Sastrawan delved into the holdings of the South East European female shirts. Her examination of the patterns and stitches of the pieces held in the collection evoked memories of female garments in her homeland, Indonesia. Sastrawan, who had just completed her Masters in Global Arts at Goldsmiths, was interested in explorations of the variety of narratives within histories, geographies and the visual cultures that have existed in Bali and Indonesia. Reflecting on the affective connections between the Indonesian and European aesthetics of feminine clothing, she embarked on creating a prototype that could materialise these connections and render them relevant

6. For ethnographies of personal and affective uses of headscarf fashion in the UK and Turkey, see Tarlo 2010 and Crăciun 2017.

to the needs of contemporary women. Rather than using home-made materials and traditional skills, she utilised a mass-produced white T-shirt that evoked notions of casual and comfortable dress for women across the world. Her artwork, utilising



Part of Stanhope's display exploring pattern and female skin.  
Photo credit: Savitri Sastrawan.

both aesthetic traditions, was decorated in watercolour patterns and elaborate stitches that alluded to the fluidity of aesthetic demarcations. This way, the piece explored the connections between the Indonesian and European folk notions of traditional pattern as well as the relationships between the everyday and the celebratory functions of folk garments.

Rebecca Miller's work has been a reflexive exploration of the possibilities of creative reworking of the functions attached to traditional female garments. Her installation for the *Forging Folklore* exhibition revisited a project she had completed during an artist residency in Serbia in 2008. The original work was driven by a desire to rethink identity in relation to her Vlach roots. Miller was a doctoral researcher on the ACT program at Goldsmiths exploring the intersections of health and well-being, creativity and digital animation. For her contribution, Miller explored her personal Vlach heritage and art practice. For the 2008 artwork, Miller used the story of Serbians allegedly visiting Vlach women who were believed to possess shamanistic talents. Her work with traditional textiles woven by Vlach women sought to reconstruct

contemporary swimwear out of woven belts. Working with the pieces, she came across the tension embedded in the material and their intended functions. The textiles were scratchy and make the finished swimwear very uncomfortable.

For Miller, this illustrated constricting elements of traditional customs and strict codes of gender typical of traditional culture. Fabric that was functional for traditional folk costumes did not translate to construct a modern bikini meant to free the body. The dysfunctionality of the swimwear, Rebecca reflected in the explanatory exhibition panel, spoke of the clash of the old traditions and the rapid globalization of the world. In 2008, the swimwear was displayed in the trendiest storefront in Kučevo, Serbia, concurrently with the folk art festival. Women and men paraded by the storefront modelling traditional Vlach costume. Miller's plan to have models wearing the swimwear in the parade was deterred by warnings that it would be considered disrespectful, deviate from the traditional costume, and would be a violation of modesty and the female body. Her attempt to reconnect her heritage and contemporary art practice therefore turned out to be a site of friction and tension with values and notions of appropriateness.

Her poster reflecting on the Serbian project in the *Forging Folklore* display took on new layers of meaning. It was a reflection on working within an uninformed context and on double misappropriation. Vlach textile traditions were transgressed along with the artwork. The swimwear was kept by a curator to be presented in the 2009 exhibition "From the Periphery" at the Dom Omladine Museum, in Belgrade, Serbia, and has not been returned since. Miller's poster presented in London was a way of reclaiming authorship of the artwork as an evolving critique of the many layers of appropriation of traditional textiles, specifically via the textiles of the Vlach women.



Folklore-inspired T-shirt design by Sastrawan.  
Photo credit: Savitri Sastrawan.

Buchczyk's work reflected on these emerging contestations of appropriation and ownership of the folk patterns and forms. The folk pattern has long been used in creative practice and the fashion industry. Since Yves Saint Laurent's pioneering 1981 collection based on Matisse's painting *La Blouse Romaine*, Romanian folk themes have been a key part of haute couture and street fashion repertoires. Folk appropriations in fashion often tend to overlook the rich histories, values and broader contexts in which textiles are embedded. Folklore often appears as a set of visual citations, a renewable source in the public domain to be drawn from. These appropriations are not equal or value free. At the outset of the exhibition, Buchczyk contacted the press offices of various fashion houses regarding the use of images from their collection in the *Forging Folklore* exhibition. She was refused on copyright grounds but also told she would be able to use them if she were a fashion blogger. The only possibility of display was related to a potential commercial

benefit for the fashion brand. Her work, by presenting these illegal images, reflected on these contradictions and ambiguities of ownership, copyright, and transmutation of design and form. Her installation within the cut-and-paste pattern sheet sought to map the threads of circulation, aspiration, and forgery.

The installation has also traced the complex stories and affective qualities related to the pattern sheets and catalogues. In the 1980s, Goldsmiths acquired several pattern books and textile pieces to be used in the College's teaching collection, often in the fashion department. Most of these patterns were valued by their "folkloric" quality. In the same period, East European women strived to be fashionable, buying Western glossy magazines, trying to get hold of different patterns and stitching together clothes in a modern style. Just as in Urdea's objects travelling across the Iron Curtain, Buchczyk's installation looked at the intersecting trajectories of patterns – some travelling East, others being sent West. The installation therefore juxtaposed the Balkan pattern books from Goldsmiths with the Western pattern books obtained by the East European women. In this context, one of the exhibited objects was a Burda Style magazine issue belonging to Buchczyk's grandmother who, like many East European women, forged her desired fashion style with her own hands. Under martial law in Poland in 1981, clandestine fashion press was sent with food packages from West Germany. Under socialism, just as several other women in the region, Buchczyk's grandmother sourced design ideas, designs, materials and tools from the West. Many of their fashion desires were situated on the other side of the Iron Curtain (Bartlett 2010). The possession of the pattern sheet was therefore a sign of their power and individual autonomy. In Buchczyk's work, the composition of the Balkan pattern book, the Burda pattern sheet and the illicit images of catwalk models wearing folklore-inspired clothes aimed to demonstrate the different formulations of





Buchczyk's poster illustrating fashion appropriation.  
Photo credit: Savitri Sastrawan.

taste, ownership, appropriation, innovation, and traditional skill.

The contributions by Buchczyk, Miller, Pârvan, Pyndiah, Sastrawan and Stanhope demonstrated the ways in which the folk prototype could trigger several situated enactments and processes of active regeneration. Each traditional thing, be it object, material or pattern, gathered around itself a different constellation of values and creative directions. By showcasing these discontinuities and potentialities of the folkloric archive, the artists and researchers showed that the folkloric does not occupy a fixed position between the traditional and innovative. Instead, it tells us about the continuities and discontinuities of social life, relationality of material culture and the

significance of sensory entanglements with archival material.

### *Three Ways of Forging the Archive*

The *Forging Folklore, Disrupting Archives* exhibition project used the concept of forgery to question the relation between folkloric objects, the archive and belonging. By using the notion of “forgery”, it attempted to move away from the question of “authenticity” – a term that has a traceable political charge in the Balkans and elsewhere. Instead, “forgery” allowed to explore “folklore” in its materiality, and to bring to the fore the kinds of relationships that the material mediated. The three threads were ways to demonstrate the multiplicity of narratives emerging from reconnections with the “traditional.”

The first curatorial thread, explored the forgery of folklore as a means to investigate judgements of value. Urdea used her own collection to explore the anthropological notion of gift and the relationships that objects mediate. Her collection of objects was also a collection of biographies, which did not always sit well together. To display them was also her attempt to resolve their incongruous stories. Perhaps the role of the public gallery after all is not accurate representation, but revealing unresolved stories and objects. Much like Nicolescu's work with the archive, Urdea found that each collection contains elements that disrupt its potentially totalizing narrative. To further Kopytoff's point (1988), biographies – of people and of objects – were useful in this respect. Such points of rupture could help re-write parts of the post-war social history, from the vantage point of folk items, their collectors, and the institutions involved in safeguarding them.

The second thread was conceptualised as a practice of digging into folklore's ideology. Nicolescu's exploration of Albert Lloyd's archives in Goldsmiths allowed to investigate the connection between communism (the “real-existing” or the ideological one) and folklore. In situating Lloyd's folkloric archives in the UK, she acknowledged a bureaucratic



complementarity (or meeting place) between Romania and the UK. Her installation prompted to personal interpretation of archives, but also to how folklore is associated to political “neutrality,” despite its use by fascist, communist, and liberal regimes.

The third thread into artistic revisions and appropriations of folklore explored the possibilities of forgery stemming from artistic encounters with the collection. The works presented in this part of the exhibition aimed to recreate folk prototypes to explore the possibilities and limits of artistic engagement with the traditional. For the artists and researchers, traditional patterns and objects generated different trajectories, connections and points of departure. The thread created a critical space to investigate the forked paths of folkloric material and to imagine its multiple modalities. This forgery invited for a closer examination of the lookalikes as well as the sources to unravel stories to reveal fragments and work with our own attachments and misconceptions. By forging folklore the thread was conceptualised as an experiment in probing what kind of possible futures could be imagined for, and with, traditional material (Basu and Macdonald 2007).

Urdea’s story of fieldwork research, Nicolescu’s surreal installation exploring the shifting emphases of archival gestures, and Buchczyk’s combination of artistic forgeries revealed the ways in which archives and collections could be reignited by innovative connections. By blurring the boundaries between tradition and innovation, the collection and the everyday, the archive and the art installation, this project uncovered the artificiality of these categories and visualised the potential of their hybrid futures.



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